

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

CD/ED

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF CURRENT INTELLIGENCE
3 August 1961

OCI No. 0418/61

Copy No.

40

CURRENT INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Israeli Elections on 15 August 1961

1. Offices to be filled: All of the 120 seats in the Knesset, Israel's unicameral parliament.

2. Parties participating: Fifteen parties, nine fewer than in the previous election in November 1959, have presented election lists from which, under Israel's system of proportional representation, the members of the fifth Knesset will be chosen. Prime Minister Ben-Gurion's moderate Israel Labor party (Mapai) is the largest and most powerful. The Freedom party (Herut), a non-socialist Zionist party descendant from the extremist Irgun Zvai Leumi of the British mandate period, heads the opposition. The newly formed Liberal party is a merger of the Progressive and General Zionist parties. There are two left-wing socialist parties, Labor Unity (Achdut Haavoda) and the United Workers' party (Mapam), and a small but active Communist party (Maki). The National Religious party, Agudat Israel (The Assembly of Jewry), and Paolei Agudat Israel (The Assembly of Jewish Workers) represent clerical interests. Of the six remaining parties, two are Arab parties affiliated with Mapai, two are independent Arab parties, and two purport to represent "oriental" Jewish immigrants. The latter four are all new groups that did not participate in the elections for the fourth Knesset.

25X6



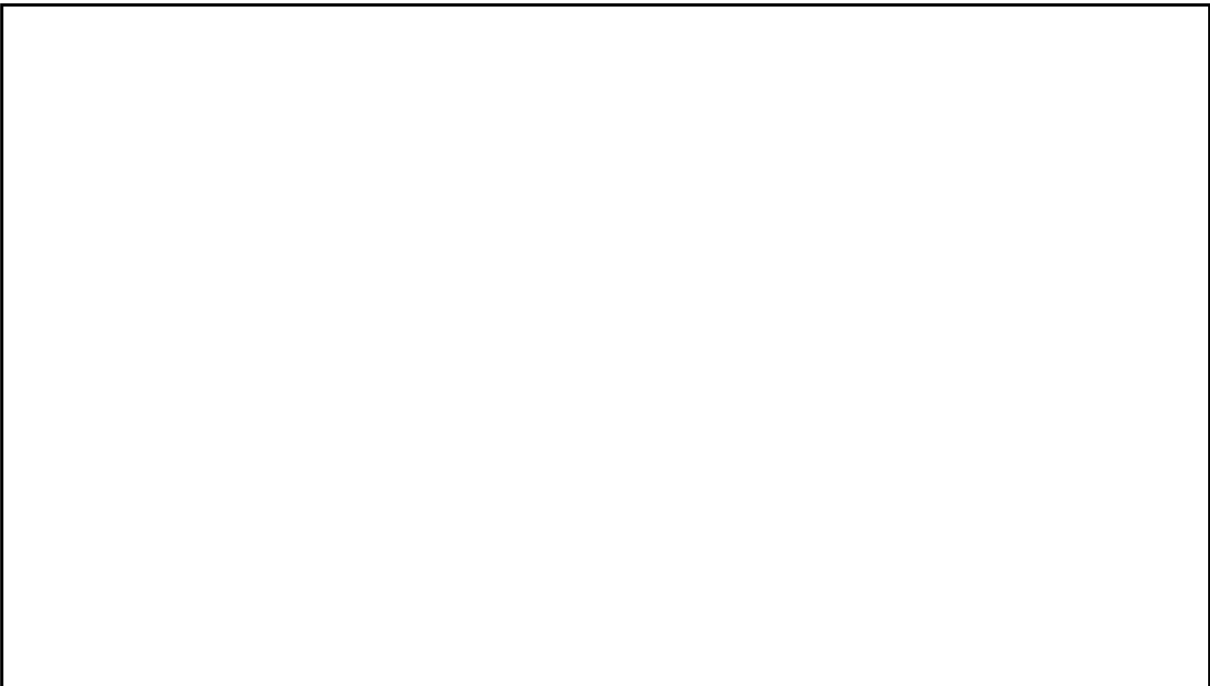
State Department review completed

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

CONFIDENTIAL

Approved For Release 2005/06/09 : CIA-RDP79S00427A000500020003-0

25X6



4. Present party strengths: Mapai, which has dominated every government since the state's birth in 1948, has 47 of the 120 Knesset seats. Herut has 17, the National Religious party 12, Mapam 9, Achdut HaAvoda 7, and the Communists 3. The 8 former General Zionist seats together with the Progressives' 6 are now controlled by the new Liberal party. The remaining 11 seats are divided among the other two religious parties and the Arab parties affiliated with Mapai.

5. Principal issues: The issue underlying all others is whether Ben-Gurion's continued leadership of the government is desirable or necessary. The question was raised during the crisis early this year over the so-called "Lavon affair" when Ben-Gurion resigned and brought down the government. The prime minister acted in response to charges that two of Ben-Gurion's protégés, Dayan and Perez, had "framed" Lavon while he was serving as defense minister in 1955. Ben-Gurion's action, which was coupled with a threat to retire for good, forced his reluctant Mapai colleagues to accede to his demands that Lavon be ousted as secretary general of the powerful Israel Labor Federation (Histadrut) controlled by the party.

Approved For Release 2005/06/09 : CIA-RDP79S00427A000500020003-0

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

Approved For Release 2005/06/09 : CIA-RDP79S00427A000500020003-0

This drastic exertion of power by Ben-Gurion aroused considerable public indignation and alienated non-Mapai cabinet members in the coalition who had voted to exonerate Lavon. Following Lavon's removal, the Achdut Ha'avoda, Mapam, Progressive, and National Religious party representatives refused to form a new coalition with Ben-Gurion as prime minister. Mapai's opponents are attempting to project a specter of Ben-Gurion's alleged "undemocratic" or "dictatorial" propensities.

In an effort to silence or vitiate criticism of the prime minister and his party for their handling of the Lavon affair, Mapai spokesmen have been emphasizing the Arab threat to Israel's security and the importance of Ben-Gurion and the party to the successful defense of the country during its thirteen-year existence. Other issues stressed by Mapai are the country's economic prosperity and Ben-Gurion's perennial plea to reform the electoral process by instituting a system based on constituencies.

Herut is trying to cast discredit on the record of Ben-Gurion and Mapai in security matters by exploiting the arrest and trial for espionage of Israel Beer, who had been closely associated with the prime minister.

6. Principal factors influencing the outcome: The outcome of the election will depend on how successful Ben-Gurion and his party are in overcoming whatever damage there has been to their prestige as a result of the Lavon affair. According to the embassy, Mapai is encouraged by the fact that the affair, which reached its climax in February, has tended to recede from public interest as a campaign issue. The same may be said of the Israel Beer espionage case.

Mapai's superior organization in the past has made an important contribution to the party's success by getting out the vote. This capability apparently will be tested severely in the forthcoming election in view of the apparent apathy of the public toward the election and the absence of an estimated 40,000 Israelis on holidays

Approved For Release 2005/06/09 : CIA-RDP79S00427A000500020003-0

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

Approved For Release 2005/06/09 : CIA-RDP79S00427A000500020003-0

outside the country. The proportion of eligible voters who actually participate in the election accordingly may fall below the usual high percentages.

The embassy reports it is generally agreed that a low turnout at the polls will be harmful to Mapai, which in the past has drawn heavily from among the "floating" voters, and to the new Liberal party. The latter appeals to the professional classes, to the intelligentsia, and to the business-industrial interests; many of these supporters are assumed to be among the thousands on vacations. Herut, whose appeal is primarily to the underprivileged, might receive a proportionally larger percentage of votes if the turnout is low. The two left-wing parties and the religious parties receive their support primarily from their own members, who are believed sufficiently disciplined to get to the polls in full strength.

7. Background: All Israelis who were 18 years of age as of 31 December 1960 and who are properly registered are eligible to vote. This includes immigrants. The total number of eligible voters reportedly is 1,263,369 out of a total population of over 2,250,000. In 1959, 81 percent of those eligible voted. In 1955, 1951, and 1948 the figures were 83, 77, and 87 percent respectively.

There is only one constituency covering the entire country. The voter casts his ballot for a party and its entire list of candidates rather than for individual candidates. The number of Knesset seats each party obtains is determined by the percentage of the total vote it receives.

8. Informed opinion on outcome: It is generally agreed that there will be no drastic shift in the relative strength of the major parties. The only real question is how large a plurality Mapai will obtain. It appears to have weathered the storm over the Lavon affair, and the consensus now is that it loses any seats at all, the number will be no more than five. The Liberal party stands to gain from any substantial defection of

Approved For Release 2005/06/09 : CIA-RDP79S00427A000500020003-0

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

Approved For Release 2005/06/09 : CIA-RDP79S00427A000500020003-0

erstwhile Mapai supporters. Some of these, however, may not choose to go to the polls at all. The strength of the other parties, with the possible exception of some of the smaller parties, probably will remain the same.

9. Significance for US security interests: No issue directly affecting the United States is involved in the election. The plurality Mapai is almost certain to receive at the polls will mean that it again, with Ben-Gurion as prime minister, will dominate Israel's government. Israel's policies accordingly will continue to be pro-Western to the extent that they are related to East-West issues. In a regional context, the current Israeli position on points of dispute with the Arabs--differences which constitute a perennial threat to peace in the area--will also be perpetuated.

In 1963 and 1964 Israel will face the problem of making drastic adjustments in its economy due to the scheduled expiration of German reparations payments. During the same period, the Israelis expect to implement the first stage of their Jordan River diversion project--a development which almost certainly will be attended by increased Arab-Israeli hostility, if indeed it has not caused a crisis before that time. Under normal circumstances, the new Knesset would have been elected in the midst of these events. The forthcoming election, just 22 months after the previous one, has upset this timetable, but the result could mean that Israel will have a stable and settled government and parliament during the critical period of 1963-64.

HUNTINGTON D. SHELDON
Assistant Director
Current Intelligence

25X1

25X1

Orig:

Dist:

Approved For Release 2005/06/09 : CIA-RDP79S00427A000500020003-0

CONFIDENTIAL